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Outsiders' Perspectives in Dutch Biography: The Year in the Netherlands

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OUTSIDERS' PERSPECTIVES IN DUTCH BIOGRAPHY

THE YEAR IN THE NETHERLANDS

HANS RENDERS AND DAVID VELTMAN

In her contribution to the edited volume *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, South African researcher Lindie Koorts introduces Herman Giliomee's *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* as "arguably the most influential contribution to post-1994 Afrikaner historiography" (150). The selection of "prominent individuals" who were honored with a short biography in this book was not based upon a canon of Afrikaner heroes but on a political theory outlined by the American scholar Michael Walzer. Walzer describes the "connected critic" as the individual who is bound to his community, although observing it from the periphery to remain critical of its injustices (xi). This concept of the "connected critic" offers insight into the question how biography can give shape to a community, including or excluding the way a subject criticizes society's policies and practices. Biographies of "connected critics" will focus on what makes these critics committed to their society. A biography on someone who has chosen to position themselves from an outsider's perspective will pay attention to the forces that drove the subject to choose a different path, without engaging in politics or opinion-making. Biographies of connected critics do not necessarily have to be about politicians: biographers choose to depict their subjects by underscoring their subjects' struggles as outsiders whose opinions are eventually celebrated by the public. It is our aim to show that this type of biography is gaining popularity these days in the Netherlands.

The Dutch book market is oriented internationally because a large number of foreign biographies are translated into Dutch. Examples include Simon Schama's *The Face of Britain: The Nation through Its Portraits*, Gareth Stedman Jones's *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, Julia Bird's *Victoria: The Queen*, Victor Sebestyen's *Lenin the Dictator*, Laurence Bergreen's *Casanova: The World of a Seductive Genius*, and Thore D. Hanssen's *Brunhilde Pomsel: A German Life*. The weekly newspaper *Vrij Nederland* featured in 2016 an

eight-page interview with noted biographer Richard Holmes (Renders and Vullings). But there is also a substantial subcategory of biographies of foreign people written by Dutch authors. Cas J. J. van Houtert, for example, wrote a biography of the German medieval emperor Friedrich II, and Jaap Verheul published a full-length biography of John Lothrop Motley, the nineteenth-century historian who made Holland popular among Americans.

Many contemporary Dutch biographers are positioning their Dutch subjects as outsiders with a personal perspective on Dutch society. On the first page of Graa Boomsma's *Leven op de rand*, his biography of Albert Alberts (1911–1995), this Dutch author is called a *buitenstaander* [outsider]. Alberts's work as a writer is difficult to classify: next to his novels and collections of literary stories, he wrote historical books, biographies, and memoirs. In his home village, Blaricum, Alberts was called a *sfinx* (sphinx) for his ability to speak out frankly and to be introverted at the same time. Working at the Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, the ministry of foreign affairs, in Den Haag, Alberts was able to do research for his historical novels during lunchtime: his office was right next door to the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek*. These circumstances enabled him to live the life of an outsider who never wanted to draw attention to his own personal matters. Alberts was perfectly aware of the way he was representing himself and chose to keep himself far from political debate. His biographer, Boomsma, stresses Alberts's role as a journalist at the leftist-intellectual magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, a job he held from 1947 onward. Even before the Netherlands began their ill-fated "police actions" to restore law and order in the Dutch Indies, Alberts, as a former administrative employee, wrote critical articles about the role of the colonial regime.

Last year another biography of a "connected critic," in Walzer's sense, appeared in the Netherlands: Elly Kamp's book on Ferdinand Bordewijk (1884–1965). As the second biography of the same person, this kind of text is highly unusual in the Netherlands. The justification for publishing a second biography on Bordewijk may be that Kamp's text is a dual biography: it also features the story of Bordewijk's wife, Johanna Bordewijk-Roepman. Ferdinand Bordewijk is known for texts that incorporate magical realism, including his novellas *Blokken*, *Knorrende beesten*, and *Bint*, but he was made famous by his novel *Karakter*, published in 1938. Johanna Bordewijk-Roepman was a composer and, according to Kamp, very famous in her time. Although much has been written about Bordewijk, including Reinold Vugs's biography of him in 1995, almost nothing was known about his wife until this latest publication. Since Kamp's research is the first to be supported by the Bordewijk family, her book contains a good amount of new information.

The work of Louis Couperus, author of *Eline Vere*, *De stille kracht*, *Van oude mensen: De dingen die voorbij gaan*, and *De boeken der kleine zielen*, is still being read and performed in theaters. In 1933 Henri van Booven published the first biography of Couperus, and from the tone of the biography, it is easy to tell that they were close friends. Couperus's next biographer was Frederic Bastet, whose 1987 biography caused an outrage, because the book was more of an inventory of anecdotes than a story with a beginning and end, although Bastet had already defended himself against this kind of criticism in his introduction: "Bij Couperus kan men er dan niet omheen vrijwel ál het werk bij de biografie te betrekken" [When it comes to Couperus, no one could avoid taking almost *all* his works into account] (25). Now there is the more than one-thousand-page biography by Rémon van Gemeren. Van Gemeren comments on, analyzes, and puts Couperus's entire oeuvre into context within the whole of European culture. "Ik heb dit feuilleton minstens honderd keer gelezen" [I have read this text at least a hundred times] (185), van Gemeren writes after a quotation of over two pages. The reception of each of Couperus's books by literary critics is described neatly. Each school in literature or the arts is explained, and the author even investigates in which way every figure in Couperus's novels represents decadence, narcissism, and more. It is a relief that Couperus was appalled by expressionism and cubism, otherwise his biographer would have given an outline of these, too. In this biography, Couperus is allowed to perform on a colossal stage; the problem is only that the scene is put in front instead of behind the main actor.

Outsiders' biographies are focused on the mentality of an era, whereas other biographies are primarily praising their hero and downplaying others. This is the case in Sylvester Hoogmoed's *De moeder van Ramses*, which adds depth to his 2012 biography of Dutch singer Ramses Shaffy (1933–2009), titled *We zien well: Het wonderlijke leven van Ramses Shaffy*. During his life, Shaffy always had the aura of being as free as a bird, hopping from one job, lover, or home to another. Shaffy's father was Egyptian, which he knew from his surname, but his mother was a complete mystery to him. Hoogmoed's latest biography is of Shaffy's mother, Alexandra Wysocka. It appears that Shaffy's life as a *bohémien* was only surpassed by that of his mother, who, thinking she was the only heiress of the last Russian czar, always lived under the protection of important noblemen, ambassadors, and high-ranking politicians. Hoogmoed was given access to a suitcase with documents that contained the only reliable information on the fanciful life of Shaffy's mother. Still, in her biography it remains unclear who she actually was: a spy, a countess, or just a thief? In *De moeder van Ramses*, an outsider's history is told about someone who was an outsider even to people who thought they knew her best.

Another example of a person who deliberately shaped his life narrative is the publisher Johan Polak (1928–1992). As recounted in Koen Hilberdink's biography, the young Polak hired a room above renowned publishing house Van Oorschot in central Amsterdam at the end of the 1940s. The ambitious tenant had inherited a lot of money from his family and, despite his age, was considered to be a connoisseur of J. H. Leopold, a poet whose work was only available in rare bibliophile editions. As an assistant to the famous but ailing professor P. N. van Eyck, Polak proposed to Van Oorschot an edition of Leopold's collected works. Van Oorschot accepted Polak's proposal, and the publication was funded by Polak himself. Polak's significance is difficult to overstate. With all his money and love for beautiful books, he played a major role as mediator of literature: he funded publications by De Beuk and diverse literary magazines, was one of the founders of the publishing house Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, and established the Athenaeum Bookshop. He was also a prolific collector of precious manuscripts and rare books. Hilberdink documents all these facets of Polak's life in his biography, which was published by Van Oorschot, but above all, he stresses Polak's remarkable personality.

Wim Sanders's biography of the Dutch author A. Moonen (1937–2007) is a portrait of an outsider par excellence, even an outcast. Moonen's novels are not very well known in Holland, probably because many critics and contemporary authors considered him to be too mad to be taken seriously. He was a writer's writer, writing about his sexual aberrations and his mental strains. But Sanders's recent biography, *Bel ik u wakker, beste man?*, shows that, in fact, Moonen was a tragic figure. He was acquainted with many people in Dutch literary society from the 1970s onward, but his chronic mental illnesses prevented people from becoming friends with him. The book is not only about Moonen, but also about the conditions that include or exclude a person from literary groups.

In the past year, biographies were also written about people who self-consciously profiled themselves as outsiders. Onno Blom published a one-thousand-two-hundred-page book on the author Jan Wolkers; Monica Soeting presented Cissy van Marxveldt, an author of books for girls, as being a feminist avant la lettre; and Eva Rovers wrote a biography of the tormented poet and television personality Boudewijn Büch, who cherished his exclusion from society to the extent that he even invented a rumor that he was a pedophile, a theme that he used in his poetry.

Although Frank Lodeizen (1939–2013) was a fairly successful artist known by a few collectors and fellow artists for his etchings and gouache drawings, he probably would not have had his own biography if he had had a different last name, which he shares with a young poet with a mythic reputation, Hans Lodeizen. In fact, Frank Lodeizen did not know of this famous poet

until he saw an obituary in which the death was announced of his twenty-six-year-old grandnephew. Still, because of their shared name, Frank Lodeizen gained friends in the literary society who assumed the two were close relations. Rineke van Houten's recently published biography on Frank Lodeizen perpetuates this misunderstanding, which is troubled even more by how van Houten does not cite the individual quotations in her book, though she does list her sources in the final pages. This lack of direct citations makes the reader wonder if van Houten's biography might not turn to fiction to describe Lodeizen's life.

DUTCHMEN ABROAD

The biography of Piet Mondrian that Hans Janssen published in 2016 was remarkable, because Janssen stressed the spontaneous and outgoing character of this internationally renowned artist. Until now, Mondrian's neoplasticist art of rigidly composed straight lines and symmetrical, colored fields was thought to have been made by a neurotic hermit who would get nervous when someone put a box of matches on his table the wrong way. Mondrian even trimmed his moustache askew, thus making it look rectangular. Born in Amersfoort in 1872, Mondrian is now world famous, having turned the world upside down, especially with his painting *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which was left unfinished when he died in New York in 1944. It is not very surprising that a few biographies have been published about him. However, Janssen's approach to his subject diverges from his predecessors. Since he is curator of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Janssen encounters Mondrian's masterpieces on a daily basis. That is why he can now speak of writing a "schilders-biografie" [artist's biography] (13). In his introduction he promises to use the method of a *vie romancée*: based upon documentation, his own experience of observing Mondrian's art, and his strong writing skills, he occasionally takes the liberty to "de grens naar het fictionele over te steken" [transgress borders with the fictional world] (14) by daring to write this book from Mondrian's own perspective. Janssen therefore writes Mondrian's life "op een manier die de gelijkenis met de roman opzoekt" [in a way that could resemble working on a novel] (14). After reading such an introduction, readers might worry about the veracity of Janssen's biography, but, fortunately, fiction is only used to make Mondrian's story more readable. Janssen simply could no longer stand the image of Mondrian as a purist or hermit. Janssen also skirts details of Mondrian's life, perhaps to make him more likeable. For example, whereas another biography, by Léon Hanssen, stresses Mondrian's anti-Semitism, Janssen does not discuss this at all. Janssen may justify this decision because of the perspective he takes in his text: Mondrian surely wouldn't call himself anti-Semitic.

Another internationally renowned Dutchman gathered his thoughts mostly in Belgium, Spain, and Italy. Only by the very nature of his work as a pope, Adriaan Floriszoon Boeyens (1459–1523) was an outsider. Since the first century until now, there have been 308 popes, including the “antipopes” from Rome, Pisa, and Avignon, and only one of them came from the Netherlands. If you would put all biographies of popes together, you could build a cathedral from them, so it is still surprising that although he represented the Holy See for only one year, Adrianus VI, the name that Boeyens had given himself, continues to inspire biographers to write new books about him. The last one appeared in 2011, under the title of *De tragische paus uit de Nederlanden*. Now we have the theologian Twan Geurts’s biography.

Politicians also tend to cultivate their role as outsiders. Populist politicians, no matter how long they have been active in politics, often despise politicians, a group they do not want to belong to. In this regard, the biography of Gijs van Hall is interesting, because this connected critic remained active in politics when his engagement with social problems was strongly criticized. Biographer Dirk Wolthekker makes use of the Van Hall family archive, which includes three hundred years and measures thirty-two meters wide. Coming from a family of bankers, professors, and ministers, van Hall had the right background to become mayor of Amsterdam. In his family, there was a *communis opinio* that law and order were self-legitimizing. This perspective changed during the 1960s. Everything that was considered wrong in Dutch governmental policy was called *regentesk* or “bourgeois.” The marriage of princess Beatrix and the German Claus von Amsberg, which took place in Amsterdam, triggered a riot by squatters, which was suppressed violently by the police. When this was all said and done, van Hall made an appearance on television, making clear that he no longer belonged to this new age.

Wolthekker’s biography illustrates how members of the van Hall family maintained a certain consciousness of their place in history. Every piece of paper was kept, and verbal communication on a simple family reunion was neatly documented “voor het archief” [for the sake of the archive] (30). For example, in 1940, van Hall’s father wrote a short letter on a lunch he wanted to organize for his wedding anniversary: “Ik wil deze uitnodiging schriftelijk herhalen om onder de familiepapieren te worden gerangschikt” [I want to repeat this invitation in writing, to be filed in the family papers] (30). The file on van Hall’s work as a mayor in this archive will not be publically available until 2199. Nonetheless, it is telling that this aristocratic family gave the biographer permission to use it without restriction.

Another example of how a politician cultivated his status as an outsider is outlined in the biography of Jan Schaefer (1940–1994) by Louis Hoeks. Jan Schaefer was a socialist, pastry chef, member of the Communist Party in the Netherlands (CPN), member of parliament for the Labour Party (PvdA), state secretary in the ministry of housing during the Den Uyl administration, and alderman in the Amsterdam municipal government. From Hoek's biography, Schaefer appears to have been not only an authentic politician (he preferred to wear jeans and used slang instead of formal language), but he could also be an intimidating one. In one of Hoek's countless interviews, Schaefer discussed his "losse-tegel-theorie" [loose paving stone theory]: he said that people calling to complain about a paving cobble stone were better than theoreticians that could "urenlang lullen" [bullshit for hours on end] (79) on socialist matters. But Schaefer did not refrain from threatening to throw such a stone through someone's window. During the squatters' actions of the 1970s, he made an appeal on national radio to do so. As state secretary, he called upon members of a neighborhood "te feliciteren" [to congratulate] (92) a landlord—by throwing a stone through his window—if he was planning to evict a poor elderly lady: "Zo'n buurt begrijpt dat 'feliciteren'" [Such a neighborhood understands this "congratulation"] (92).

The biographer's autobiography can be regarded as a genre in itself. The best-known example is Richard Holmes's *Footsteps* (1985), in which he conferred upon himself the major role in his search for traces of the lives of Robert Louis Stevenson, Mary Wollstonecraft, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Gérard de Nerval. Marja Puijs has written a book on her unsuccessful attempt to write a biography of the author Nettie Nijhoff-Wind and, recently, an autobiography was published by James Atlas, biographer of Saul Bellow. Jan van der Vegt, biographer of the Dutch poets Hans Andreus, Adriaan Roland Holst, Hendrik de Vries and Jan Elburg, now formulates his personal creed in a book with the appropriate title *Vierspan*, which means "four in hand." In this intriguing book, van der Vegt tells how things were going behind the scenes during the thirty years that he was working on his four biographies.

Various subjects of recent Dutch biographies can be regarded as "connected critics." They were perfectly able to criticize Dutch or foreign policymaking, but often chose to do this from their perspectives as outsiders, without actually engaging in it. Many of these biographies reveal the motivations for their struggles for acknowledgment. These motivations give a remarkable view of the mentality of the age these subjects were living in.

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